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For a symposium on *Epistemological Disjunctivism* in *Journal of Philosophical Research*

## PRÉCIS OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISJUNCTIVISM

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ABSTRACT. An articulation is offered of the main themes of my book, *Epistemological Disjunctivism* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

Let me first outline about what I was trying to achieve in *Epistemological Disjunctivism*.<sup>1</sup> The overarching idea behind the book is to defend a broadly McDowellian account of perceptual knowledge, a view which I think it is fair to say is anathema to many in contemporary epistemology.<sup>2</sup> This is the proposal that one's perceptual knowledge can, in suitable conditions, enjoy rational support which is both reflectively accessible and also factive. In particular, epistemological disjunctivism is at root the idea that in paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge one's rational support for one's knowledge that  $p$  can be that one sees that  $p$ , where this rational support is both reflectively accessible and also factive (i.e., it entails  $p$ ).

It's easy to see why epistemological disjunctivism would be thought controversial. To begin with, notice that it doesn't fit into the usual epistemic categories. Consider the epistemic internalism/externalism distinction, for example. That one's rational support is reflectively accessible appears to suggest a form of epistemic internalism, but that's hard to square with the rational support in question being factive (think here of the new evil demon thesis that epistemic internalists are keen to cite). But while having epistemic support which has direct implications for how the world in fact is sits well with epistemic externalism, epistemic externalists would hardly be keen on such a 'worldly' condition being reflectively accessible.

Epistemological disjunctivism is also thought problematic because it appears to run immediately into intractable difficulties. For example, if one genuinely has reflective access to factive reasons for believing an empirical proposition, then doesn't that entail that one has reflective access to empirical facts?

Given that this idea is so controversial, my goal in the book was not to offer a complete defence of the view, but was rather much more limited. There is, after all, no point writing a huge tome defending a proposal that most people think is a non-starter. My aim was instead to show two things: (i) that the reasons why epistemologists might suppose that this view is a non-starter are bad reasons on closer inspection, and (ii) that epistemological disjunctivism is the kind of view that one would want to endorse if only it were available. (As I provocatively expressed (ii) in the book: epistemological disjunctivism is the "holy grail" of epistemology, a kind of miraculous cure for epistemological ills, albeit one which most people suppose is purely mythical).

With that in mind, there was undoubtedly a lot more that could have conceivably gone into the book. For example, I could have said more about how epistemological disjunctivism relates to metaphysical disjunctivism, an issue that receives a fairly quick treatment in the text. But it simply wasn't an aim of the book to cover all bases. It was not meant to be the definitive *magnum opus* on epistemological disjunctivism, but rather the opening salvo which (hopefully) provokes epistemologists to take this idea seriously (the *magnum opus* could then come later, ideally written by someone else!).

In any case, let's return to (i) and (ii). As regards the former, I identified three core, and apparently fatal, problems which seem to face epistemological disjunctivism. We've already noted one of them: the worry that such a view allows one to have reflective access to empirical facts. I refer to this problem as the *access problem*. The two further problems are the *distinguishability problem* and the *basis problem*.

The distinguishability problem is closely related to, though ultimately distinct from, the access problem. It concerns the fact that even the epistemological disjunctivist ought to grant that the paradigm epistemic conditions in which one knows that  $p$  in virtue of seeing that  $p$  can be indistinguishable from cases in which one thinks that one knows that  $p$  but one is in fact deceived. Call the former kind of case the 'good' case, and call the latter kind of case the 'bad' case.<sup>3</sup> Here is the distinguishability problem. If one knows by reflection that one only sees that  $p$  in the good case, then why can't one infer from one's reflective access to one's factive reason in the good case that

one is in the good case (i.e., and not the bad case)? But how is that to square with the point that one cannot distinguish between the good and the bad case?

The basis problem simply concerns the fact that on many views seeing that  $p$  is just a way of knowing that  $p$ , such that seeing that  $p$  entails knowing that  $p$ .<sup>4</sup> But then how can one's knowledge that  $p$  be based on one's seeing that  $p$ , if the latter is itself just a way of knowing that  $p$ ?

A good deal of the book is devoted to defusing these problems, and I can only sketch my general approach to these difficulties here. I think the basis problem is the least troubling of the three, so let me start with that. I'm not altogether convinced that it is a serious difficulty for the view, though I find others are very persuaded by it, which is why I put it on a par with the other two problems. In any case, the basis problem doesn't apply to my rendering of epistemological disjunctivism since I argue that seeing that  $p$  does not entail knowing that  $p$ . Indeed, I claim that we need to replace the usual crude dichotomy of good and bad cases with one on which there is a range of cases delineated, from being good in all relevant respects to being bad in all relevant respects, with a spectrum of scenarios in between. On this view we can leave room for the idea that one can see that  $p$  without knowing that  $p$ . In a nutshell, such cases concern scenarios which are objectively epistemically good but subjectively epistemically bad (e.g., where there is a misleading defeater in play). In such scenarios knowledge is lacking, but on my view the agent still sees that  $p$  in virtue of being in epistemic conditions which are objectively good. Note, however, that in these scenarios the agent is not in a position to know that  $p$  in virtue of seeing that  $p$  (because the epistemic conditions are not both objectively and subjectively epistemically good). Seeing that  $p$  is thus closely related to knowing that  $p$ , in that typically the former will go hand-in-hand with the latter, but they are nonetheless distinct, in that the former can obtain and the latter not.<sup>5</sup>

As to the access problem, my strategy is to demonstrate that on closer inspection there is no purely reflective route to knowledge of an empirical truth. The key point to bear in mind here is that seeing that  $p$  is an *empirical* reason, one that is acquired via an empirical process (perception). This prevents one from drawing the problematic conclusion on purely reflective grounds. I consider various ways of restating this puzzle to try to avoid this result, but demonstrate that none of them succeeds.<sup>6</sup>

That leaves the distinguishability problem. Here I think we do have a deep worry regarding epistemological disjunctivism (much deeper than the access or basis problems at any rate). I maintain that the key to resolving this difficulty is to take on board a distinction between what I call *favouring* and *discriminating* epistemic support, a distinction which I claim epistemologists have

overlooked. Very roughly, the idea is that there can be a way of knowing the difference which is not a way of perceptually discriminating the difference. So in Fred Dretske's (1970) famous 'zebra' case, for example, I claim that there is a way that the agent can know that the creature before her is a zebra rather than a cleverly disguised mule even though she cannot, *ex hypothesi*, perceptually discriminate between zebras and cleverly disguised mules. How does she do this? By appealing to favouring epistemic support, which in this case will involve reasons which collectively favour the believed proposition over the 'cleverly disguised mule' alternative.

The distinction between favouring and discriminating epistemic support is meant to be a perfectly general one. That is, this is a distinction which I claim all epistemologists should endorse, regardless of their view (and regardless, in particular, of whether they endorse epistemological disjunctivism). I think it helps us to dissolve certain puzzles about the relationship between perceptual knowledge and perceptual discrimination, for example, and thereby avoid advocating needless epistemological revisionism as a response to these puzzles.<sup>7</sup> The point, however, is that once we have this distinction in play then the epistemological disjunctivist can resist the distinguishability problem. The reason for this is that the epistemological disjunctivist can now argue that there is a perfectly respectable way in which a subject can know (in the good case) that she is in good case rather than the bad case which is compatible with that subject nonetheless being unable to perceptually discriminate between the good and the bad case. In short, factive reasons provide one with favouring epistemic support, but not thereby discriminating epistemic support.

With these three problems facing epistemological disjunctivism neutralised, the view is therefore shown to be viable, contrary to the conventional wisdom on this score. That brings us to (ii), the claim that epistemological disjunctivism is a proposal that we would want to endorse if it were available. There are various moves I make in this regard. One is to emphasise the naturalness of the idea of factive reasons in the perceptual case, so as to underline the point that we are only led to reject this picture under the kind of theoretical pressure that comes from being aware of the problems that are held to face such a view (problems which have been demonstrated to be illusory).<sup>8</sup> A second way of motivating epistemological disjunctivism in this regard is by showing how it enables us to find a way past the long-standing *impasse* in the epistemic internalism/externalism dispute, a point that I've already registered above.

There is a third motivation for the view that I want to briefly dwell on here, which is the purchase that epistemological disjunctivism gives us on the (broadly Cartesian) problem of radical scepticism. Epistemic internalists have long struggled with this problem, and it is often alleged that

without endorsing some form of epistemic externalism there is no way out of this difficulty. One can easily see why this is so, since if one's internalist epistemic standing is no better in the good case than it is in the bad case (in line with the new evil demon thesis), then how is one to have an adequate epistemic basis to dismiss radical sceptical scenarios (which are the *really bad* cases)? And yet epistemic externalism is not without its troubles on this score, not least because it seems to side-step rather than resolve the problem of radical scepticism.<sup>9</sup>

Epistemological disjunctivism offers us the resources to respond to radical scepticism head-on, since on this view one's reflectively accessible rational support in the good case is far superior to that which is available in the bad case, including when one is the victim of radical sceptical scenarios. Hence one does have a reflectively accessible, and thus internalistically respectable, rational basis from which one can exclude radical sceptical scenarios. There is thus no need to retreat to epistemic externalism.

More precisely, I argue that epistemological disjunctivists are able to legitimately appeal to the factive favouring epistemic support that is available to them in the good case as a means of excluding radical sceptical hypotheses. Note that this *not* because one is always entitled to appeal to factive favouring epistemic support when faced with error-possibilities. In particular, when such error-possibilities are rationally motivated then one cannot simply cite one's factive favouring epistemic support as one is not then in the good case. Recall that in the good case, as far as the epistemological disjunctivist is concerned, the epistemic conditions are both objectively and subjectively good, and the latter condition (at least) is not met where there are (undefeated) rationally motivated error-possibilities in play.

Radical sceptical scenarios are, however, never rationally motivated, at least insofar as radical scepticism is presented in its strongest form as a putative paradox. The radical sceptic is not arguing that one has a reason for thinking that one is a BIV, for example, but merely noting this possibility and asking how we would exclude it. Indeed, radical scepticism that is in the game of motivating its doubt via appeal to specific empirical reasons in this way would be easy to deal with, as it is clearly self-refuting. So long as radical sceptical scenarios are not rationally motivated, however, then they cannot suffice to take one out of the good case, and hence one's factive favouring epistemic support is available to go into bat against the radical sceptic.

Note that this is an *undercutting* response to the radical sceptical 'paradox', in that it claims that there is in fact no paradox to resolve. Insofar as radical scepticism is a *bone fide* paradox—i.e., insofar as it exposes genuine and deep tensions within our own fundamental epistemological

commitments—then any response to radical scepticism will inevitably be *overriding*, in the sense that it will involve a substantial degree of epistemological revisionism. Epistemological disjunctivism constitutes an undercutting anti-sceptical strategy in the sense that it is part of the view that a commitment to reflectively accessible factive reasons is in fact deeply rooted in our everyday epistemic practices, and that we are only led to abandon this idea under theoretical pressures which prove to be misplaced. It follows that radical scepticism does not arise out of ungarnished commonsense as it purports to, but rather illicitly smuggles in contentious theoretical moves. There is thus no need for epistemological revisionism in response to the radical sceptical ‘paradox’, since it turns out that this puzzle is as illusory as the problems that putatively demonstrated that epistemological disjunctivism is a non-starter.

There is an important *caveat* that I want to add to this treatment of radical scepticism. My goal in the book was to ‘follow-through’ on the merits of epistemological disjunctivism by demonstrating how it makes a certain style of response to radical scepticism available. In fact, I don’t think that epistemological disjunctivism represents a complete response to this kind of radical scepticism. The reasons for this are complex, and relate to the fact that I hold that this form of radical scepticism in fact involves two logically distinct sceptical arguments, one that essentially trades on closure-style reasoning, and one that essentially trades on underdetermination-style reasoning. This is not to retreat from anything I say in the book. Insofar as one treats this sceptical problem in the usual way—i.e., such that it doesn’t split into two logically distinct arguments—then I think epistemological disjunctivism is the best way to respond.

Once we recognise that we have two distinct sceptical arguments in play, however, then that complicates the picture. My own considered view is that one needs to ally epistemological disjunctivism to a broadly Wittgensteinian account of the structure of reasons. So conceived, epistemological disjunctivism bears the dialectical weight of dealing with underdetermination-based radical scepticism, while the Wittgensteinian account bears the dialectical weight of dealing with closure-based radical scepticism. The presentation of this more complex response to the problem of radical scepticism—which nonetheless has epistemological disjunctivism right at its heart—is part of my new monograph that is entirely devoted to radical scepticism.<sup>10</sup> As I argue there, epistemological disjunctivism and the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of reasons are mutually supportive views. In sloganized form, when one combines them one gets a view of rational support which, while being essentially local (i.e., there is no such thing as a universal rational evaluation, whether

positive or negative), can nonetheless be factive. I think this presents us with just the right kind of response to the problem of radical scepticism.

Since epistemological disjunctivism is a controversial view in its own right, however, it would clearly have been problematic to have tried to offer this kind of response to radical scepticism in the very first book-length defence of the view, particularly since I think epistemological disjunctivism does succeed against the radical sceptical problem as it is normally conceived.



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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Pritchard (2012*a*).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, McDowell (1995).

<sup>3</sup> Note that for technical reasons in the book the former is called the ‘good+’ case and the latter is split into a range of distinct types of ‘bad’ case, though we do not need to concern ourselves with this here. See Pritchard (2012*a*, part one). See also Pritchard (2011).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Williamson (2000, ch. 1) and Cassam (2007). See also Dretske (1969, 78-139).

<sup>5</sup> I further explore this resolution to the basis problem in Pritchard (2011).

<sup>6</sup> An earlier version of this style of response to the access problem—this time explicitly advanced on McDowell’s behalf—can be found in Neta & Pritchard (2007).

<sup>7</sup> See Pritchard (2010) and Carter & Pritchard (*forthcoming*) for more on these points.

<sup>8</sup> This is a very McDowellian way of motivating the view. See, for example, McDowell (1995).

<sup>9</sup> See Pritchard (2005*a*, *passim*; 2005*b*) for further discussion of these points.

<sup>10</sup> See Pritchard (*forthcoming*). I argued for the idea that underdetermination-based and closure-based formulations of radical scepticism are logically distinct in earlier work, in particular Pritchard (2005*c*). For a recent statement of how I apply Wittgenstein’s account of the structure of reasons to closure-based radical scepticism, see Pritchard (2012*b*).